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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000430

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/02/2017
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SUBJECT: FRANCE ASSERTS NO CHANGE IN ITS IRAN POLICY
DESPITE CHIRAC'S IRAN COMMENTS TO THE PRESS

REF: PARIS 389

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, Reason 1
.4 B/D

¶1. (C) Summary: In line with their earlier statements (reftel) on the matter, French MFA officials continued on February 2 to emphasize to us that there has been no change in official French policy with respect to Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions. End summary.

MFA Commentary

¶2. (C) In line with their earlier statements (reftel) on the matter, French MFA officials continued on February 2 to emphasize to us that there has been no change in official French policy with respect to Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions. To emphasize this point, MFA DAS-equivalent Director for Nonproliferation Philippe Errera pointed to the Elysee's February 1st communique, which states that "France, along with the international community, cannot accept an Iran armed with nuclear weapons, and calls on Iran to honor its NPT commitments, while also reaffirming Iran's right to the pursuit of civilian nuclear energy." In other words, Errera emphasized, despite the President's statements on this issue, "French policy on the Iranian nuclear question has not changed."

¶3. (C) While a meeting with the MFA's Iran Desk officer produced little other than a regurgitation of the official line, poloff had a more fruitful discussion with FM Douste-Blazy's cabinet adviser for the Middle East, Damien Loras. Loras admitted that everyone at the MFA was surprised by Chirac's remarks, which he conceded had been damaging. Trying to put a positive spin on things, Loras reasoned that the end result of Chirac's gaffe had not been all bad, inasmuch as it (much like the flap caused by Chirac's plans to send an emissary to Tehran) had forced the French foreign policy establishment to reaffirm in the strongest terms its solidarity with its international partners.

¶4. (C) Loras acknowledged that many in France, both in and outside of government, are wary of what they perceive as a repeat of the rhetorical build-up to the Iraq war. To dispel this perception, he suggested it would be helpful to give the French a clearer picture of where U.S. policy with regard to Iran is headed. Poloff affirmed that the U.S. was deliberately ratcheting up the pressure on Iran in order to produce a change in Iranian behavior, and pointed out that some increased friction with Iran was inevitable given our efforts to counter sectarian violence in Iraq whatever its origins in order to create a climate conducive to national

reconciliation.

Press Reactions

15. (SBU) Chirac's controversial statements seemingly in support of acquiescing to the inevitability of a nuclear-armed Iran and, which many observers interpreted as a major "gaffe," were headline items in the French press of February 1st and 2nd. The left-oriented daily "Liberation" carried a full-page color picture of a chagrined-looking Chirac on its front page with the headline: "Chirac: 1, Irangaffe." The afternoon daily "Le Monde," in a critical editorial asked where Chirac's statements left France's credibility at a crucial moment in the international community's effort to deal with Iran. The conservative "Le Figaro" quoted an unnamed member of Chirac's entourage as saying the U.S. media's coverage of the story was meant to trigger a "shameful controversy." "This does not surprise us coming from certain U.S. media, always quick to use anything they can against France," this official reportedly stated. Le Figaro's coverage ended by noting, gratefully, that Washington refrained on February 1 from "throwing oil on the fire" caused by Chirac's remarks.

16. (C) In other reactions, former foreign minister Hubert Vedrine (who has long been out-of-the mainstream in his view that a nuclear-capable Iran is an acceptable and manageable geopolitical problem), was quoted in Le Monde and wire services as saying that Chirac was only voicing what many experts, including in the U.S., have already concluded, namely that "a country in possession of a nuclear bomb would be constrained from using it having automatically entered

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into an equation of deterrence." Vedrine, evoking the "savage global media," also criticized the coverage of Chirac's remarks.

17. (SBU) In another, tangentially related development, the umbrella organization of France's Jewish community (CRIF) announced on February 2 that the Elysee's Diplomatic Advisor, Maurice Gourdault-Montagne (MGM), had called the CRIF's President Roger Cukierman to reassure Cukierman that there had been no change in French policy towards Iran and in France's hard line against Iran's nuclear weapons programs. (Note: In plans made before Chirac's remarks further highlighted the issue, the CRIF had called for a non-partisan rally in Paris on February 13 to solidify public support for staying the course on the Iran nuclear weapons issue. end note.)

Comment

18. (C) Comment: Retraction notwithstanding, Chirac's comments have created questions about what he really thinks on Iran and have opened the door to discussion, in press and public, of whether France could accept a nuclear-armed Iran. We suspect Chirac was rather thoughtlessly arguing (or perhaps trying to reiterate an argument he had recently encountered) that even a nuclear-armed Iran would be deterrable, not with the aim of implying that it would be acceptable for Iran to obtain the bomb, but rather to demonstrate that it served no conceivable interest for Iran to do so. (We have pointed out to our interlocutors that Chirac seems to have ignored the central point that a nuclear-armed Iran, even if deterrable, would nonetheless be better positioned to pursue its destabilizing regional agenda.) However, we cannot exclude the possibility that Chirac's comments were a reflection of deep unease about what he perceives as a toughening of U.S. policy towards Iran. Separately, questions are being raised about Chirac's age and health (he suffered a stroke in 2005) in these last few months of his presidency. One MFA official in a moment of frustration made this very point in order to explain Chirac's gaffe. Perhaps the most likely explanation

of Chirac's blunder is that it was a combination of these three elements: a poorly-expressed argument intended to show the futility of Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons; a possible reflection of Chirac's misgivings about what he sees as a dangerous escalation in U.S.-Iranian tensions; and a lapse in judgment due in part to his advancing years. End comment.

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